

# THE SPELL OF THUNGAMA

By ANNA ALICE CHAPIN

UGH! Do shut that drawer again—there's a dear! I can't bear the smell of sandal-wood any more. I dare say I thought it delicious and suggestive and all that sort of thing once, but now—well, it's suggestive enough, certainly, only—do you really want to hear about it? I rather hate to tell that story, you know—it gives me the creeps. Makes me feel the way I used to when Thungama would steal up behind us quietly, and we only knew she was there by the scent—the scent of sandal-wood. I never got used to her cat-walk and her cat-ways; but I was fond of her—oh, yes! You couldn't help it—with her little soft face and body, just like a lot of small yellowish flowers put together in the shape of a woman.

It came about this way, you see. When old Phineas Phyles put on "The Girl From the Bazaars," he appreciated that he was not going to have plain sailing to get the piece into harbor on Broadway. Imported delicacies, of course, are expected to have pretty high flavors, but there have been just about a hundred too many things written about the Indian bazaars for people not to look a bit askance at a musical comedy about the lady inhabitants. It's a lot worse than Maxim's. We're used to that sort of thing.

Well, Phineas decided that his best chance to make good lay in doing the thing so correctly and so gorgeously that half the cavilliers would be hypnotized by the splendor, and the other half could be brought around to looking on it as an educational and improving spectacle—like the ballet in "Ben Hur." He got Lemuel (you know—Jim Lemuel who used to be with Pointdexter: a fellow with a sort of flair for anything artistic and unusual) and sent him abroad to make shipments of Indian props and pretty Nautch girls. Lemuel came back with a splendid assortment of stuff—costumes, jewels, local color—and Thungama, "Little Golden Lady."

Of course it's hardly necessary to say that we called her Thingummy at first. Later—but I'll tell you about it in sequence, just as it happened.

She was the daughter of a high-caste Brahman, and she had run away to dance in the bazaars because she didn't want to marry the particular old sinner her people had picked out for her. Jolly right, too, I call it.

It seemed that she was the star dancer of the Bazaar in Delhi—or some such place—and Lemuel got her to come over with him to do the Great Oriental Dance of India on Broadway. We had been running two weeks on the road before we saw her. She was only to appear in New York and had had her rehearsals separately with the one chorus with which she had anything to do on the stage before we came into town. So her arrival on the first night made a sensation.

We girls had been engaged for two-line bits and to wear "Our Only Mrs. Cresby's" gowns—the things she used to design 'n' nights, after a half dozen Manhattans and a check from Phyles. We hadn't much interest in the show—one doesn't have after five seasons in which, like Alice and the Red Queen, you have to keep running just as hard as you can to stay in the same place.

Of course Thungama should have had a dressing room to herself, but it was a very long cast, and Sally Slye, our soubrette, wanted the big one, which would have held at least a baker's dozen of humble extras, and there were comedians, and second and third comedians, and baritones, and tenors, and leads, and a lot of people with specialties; and somehow the "Little Golden Lady" got crammed into the room with Lillian Leeds and me. You know Lil—she writes it Lilliane, I believe, now: awfully pretty, with red hair—a girl like a coconut, tough outside but the sweetest, best kind of a heart. Well, anyway, Thingummy—I mean Thungama—descended upon us that night, very grave and gentle and Oriental—with a coal-black ayah in attendance—a Tamil, I think, she was; they're the blackest of the lot. She was called Bildrah. No, I don't know what that means.

I wish I could give you an idea of what Thungama looked like. First—she was beautiful. Not pretty, you know—beautiful. Her eyes were very deep and large and thickly black. Do you know what I mean? Almost opaque black. All very dark eyes look that way a bit because you can't quite see into them; but Thungama's were wonders. They looked like circles of black velvet pasted in. When she was looking down—a perfect picture, with her delicate scrap of a straight nose and her babyish mouth—you thought you understood her entirely, and that she was a dear, and what a charming simple little girl after all! But when she lifted up her five thousand-odd eyelashes and turned those inky balls in your direction you got chills in your vertebrae and knew perfectly well that you were up against something too big for you; the East. Thungama wasn't just a girl, she was a point in the compass.

Her clothes, and the way she moved, made the rest of us feel like "Thoid Avenyer" ladies. Of course, you know those way-up Brahman people are the finest aristocrats out. They have thirty or forty centuries of exclusive, picked, no-outsiders-allowed ancestors back of them, and they started to begin with from a family of kings, back in the Dark Ages—which weren't dark, in India, but extra gilt-edged and splendid. Well, Thungama looked it. She dressed in a Sari—a long filmy white thing that she rolled herself into like a glorified baragade—and a phulkari—a big shawl embroidered in crimson and bronze—and she always wore a lot of jewelry. Some of it was stunning, but it was awfully queer—not cut, or polished, or set regularly—it just stuck together in crusts and lumps like popcorn balls. She had some unevenly colored stuff with a wonderful soft shine in it, which she told us later was Jeypore enamel—and she looked as though she expected a genuflection at the very name.

She and black Tamil woman progressed—(it wasn't a walk)—softly up to the best dressing table, and the Tamil got down on her knees and began to undo a great bundle of stuffs she had been carrying. Lil and I never even breathed. After the two were comfortably installed, Thungama looked around her at the electric lights and the looking glasses (it was a bully dressing room, beautifully fitted up—Oh, but they do you well at the "Standard Theatre") and gave the faintest sort of a smile.

"Shish Mahal, Baldrah!" she said to the ayah, and the black creature prostrated herself hastily. Her shoulders looked shocked; her face never looked anything.

Thungama's remark turned out to have been, "The Hall of Mirrors, Bildrah!"—"The Hall of Mirrors" is the name of some enormous room in their blessed old Taj Mahal, and frightfully sacred, so, of course, Bildrah was shocked at the frivolity of the comparison. Thungama was sometimes rather sacrilegious, I discovered. She paid very little attention to the forms and ceremonies of her religion when she was away from her priests. The only thing she kept pretty careful about was "caste." She was always having her things "defiled" by being touched by infidels. At first it seemed rather nasty, and we were inclined to resent it; but Gussie, in Room 7, was a Yidd before she was an actress, and she knew about "Kosher" and "traef" and all that, and we put down Thungama's caste prejudices to much the same peculiarity. Lil said that made it worse, for it put us in the place of pigs, but we had to let it go at that.

That first evening Lil ventured to address the distinguished stranger. Thungama turned her inky battery on her, and said very gently and melodiously, "Jao."

We didn't know what that meant then, so Lil persisted smilingly—moving up closer and showing the way you switch the red and blue electric lights on to test your make-up.

Then the kneeling Tamil creature jumped to her feet and launched another "Jao!" at us, which we understood perfectly this time. It was later explained to us to mean, "Begone" or "Go away," but I should have translated it, "Get out!"

But the "Little Golden Lady" suddenly relented—Lil was so pretty, and so good-humored, and so offended—and she silenced Bildrah with some word in her own tongue, and bowed graciously to us both, saying in a liquid voice:

"I explaining we iss not politeness. I numerosity pardons ask you!" (We learned afterwards that this exaggerated In-

dianizing of English was just airs; she spoke beautifully when she wasn't self-conscious.)

Then she gave us some guajak—which is Indian fudge, and heavenly—with coconut and almonds and sesame seeds (Good? Well, rather! Didn't Ruskin call a book after them?) and brownish sugar and a lot more things that I don't know. And Bildrah had a duck-fit because we touched the candy. But Thungama assured her that she could throw away all the defiled stuff later; so she was reconciled but not approving.

She liked Lil almost at once. She thought her very pretty. "Mussamat (mistress) Lilli," she would say. "She should not be named for white flower, Ari! Ari! She should be the pink flower—Gulabi, the Rose!" I, who was small and pale, she politely christened "Moti," or Pearl. But Gulabi was her favorite until—but that comes later.

When Thungama was dressed for her dance she was certainly a lovely thing. She didn't have the stupid ideas of dress that we have—so inconsistent and ugly! Where draperies made her more graceful, she had them; and where they would interfere, she dispensed with them altogether. But Thungama understood the science of grace somewhat better. She had scarfs and veils and filmy stuffs and jewels about her head and shoulders and hanging from her hips. You could see her pretty slim legs through the material, and her arms moved like flowers in the wind. But her waist was as bare as your hand, and her feet and ankles, too, except for the anklets of beaten silver that came from the coast where Tamils, like Bildrah, grow. Between the upper and the lower draperies the little fine muscles showed under her broad belt of her own golden skin as she danced. That was the only thing that showed the exertion she was making. She danced slowly for the most part, but with every bit of her. You had to watch closely or else try to do it yourself to believe what exercise it was.

And the grace and adorableness of it! It was like something you'd always known existed, but had never seen before and couldn't name now that it was there to see. It hurt you in a queer beautiful way—just as an aeolian harp does in a high, straining wind, or birch trees in the moonlight—you've seen them, all silver and green, like Wood Women whirling about together. I don't know how to put it into any words that will make you see her as she looked then. She seemed to be both the most gorgeous and the most simple thing ever made.

Sometimes she frightened us because of that sense of something non-understandable about her. You are afraid of the dark, or the sea, or the black forest, or an empty house because you don't know what may be in them and aren't sure just how much power they have to hurt you. That was why you were afraid of Thungama.

Well, she grew on us, did the "Little Golden Lady," with her black velvet eyes, and her Bildrah, and her wonderful clothes, and her jerozes (turquoises and stunners!), and her Jeypore enamel. She was so—so different, and so charming, too, and so very, very gentle and lovable. You see, she only turned on her battery of Oriental queerness once in a while. The rest of the time she was quite a duck.

One matinee day Thungama walked to the theatre. We came along a bit later, to find her surrounded by a joyful crowd. She was standing in pleased contemplation before a nice, freshly painted barber's pole. Bildrah was down, balanced on her head and knees, and the barber in flattered delight was, in Dago-English, offering them every variety of shampoo as a bonus for the unexpected advertising.

We rescued her, and she explained that the gentleman of the bangle was obviously a very holy priest of extremely exalted caste, since he erected before his very doorway the sacred red and white stripes of the mighty god Shiva.

I'll never forget the time she discovered that we were calling her Thingummy. At first she had accepted it as a very creditable attempt of our uncouth tongues to make the music of her very superior Brahman name. But when she heard some extras snicker at it, and made a few gentle inquiries, she gradually realized that she was being ridiculed, though in a very harmless, kindly way. She came into the dressing room that evening as sweet, as demure as ever, her night-black eyes as deep, her lips as babyishly serious. She paused at her dressing table and looked from one to the other of us, most gravely and gently. Then she spoke.

"You shall call me my name. It is a good name. You shall call it."

"We do, Thingummy," said Lil, twinkling wickedly. "No," said Thungama, softly. "Not that other. It is not my name. I—I am Thungama, of the Dikshatar Brahmins, descended of Cholykyan kings. You shall not to laugh at me! If you laugh, you die. The gods come always to one of the caste."

She untwisted her sash and took from it a small silver box. The scent of sandal-wood came from it.

"This," she said, "is the holy box of the priests of Brahma. One of my house had it—a great trust. Now it is mine. It is filled with the ashes of sacred sandal-wood. It is more powerful than all—all the West!"

I wish I could give you Thungama's gesture. It was sudden, large, convincing. She looked at us gravely as before.

"You shall never to laugh at me," she said. "You shall never make Thungama angered. It will not be well."

I don't mind admitting that she was a bit creepy. Anyway, we always talked to her very respectfully after that. I think we began to feel more and more differently toward her—to suspect her (rather shamefacedly, you know, back in our minds) of some great, big, scaring quality quite out of place in her small person. She was marked for tragic times, little Thungama—even we could feel it. The dressing room reeked of alien influences and forces. The smell of the sandal-wood crowded out the familiar odors of hot grease, paint and rice powder.

Sometimes, when she was in the right mood, she'd chatter softly about the East, and we'd really hear the "tinklin' temple bells," see the bright mix up of color at night in the Chandni Chank, and watch by those poor dead folk of Delhi lying by the Ganges, with marigolds around their necks, and, just beyond, the burning-ghat with the "curling wreaths of smoke." Oh, well, it was only imagination, I dare say—and the sandal-wood. It did seem as though Thungama had some gift of transmitting things to you, as surely as though she worked a brain-wireless.

Did you ever meet Jack Parrish, our leading man? He was a big, laughing fellow, with bright, red-brown eyes, and white teeth under a close-cropped mustache. You know the type, as common as grass in America; but evidently, in his vivacity, and energy, and frankness, a brand-new thing to Thungama. She fell in love with him.

One night Lil had been talking to Jack in the wings, and Thungama and her sandal-wood drifted by. For once a light came into her heavy black eyes, and after Jack had gone on for his cue, she came up to Lil with the queer stiff step wild animals use when they are hunting.

"You leave alone," she said. Her voice was as smooth as ever, but it had a little nasty note, not in it, but back of it. It was a sort of oily rasp—do you know what I mean?—wet silk sounds that way if you scrape it slowly with your finger nail. "You leave alone," she said again.

"What are you driving at, Thungama?" demanded Lil bluntly. "Leave what alone?"

"Him!" said Thungama. "I wish it—I, Thungama. He is not for you. He is a god—such a one as you may not see though you journey by Kafilra from Peshawur to Tuticorin, and from Jamrud Fort to the sea."

"Gee!" commented Lil, with faint derision. You see, Jack Parrish was quite an ordinary sort of chap, really.

"He is mine," proceeded Thungama, not troubling to notice her interruption.

"I didn't know about your mortgage," said Lil flippantly. But she wheeled off and left Thungama to herself. The "Little Golden Lady's" room was worth a lot of her company just then. The climax came on the last night of the run of the piece

in New York. We were all in a sort of a gale; I don't know what got into us. We giggled and gaped, and larked through the evening, and Lil was the maddest of the lot. She flirted in the most bare-faced way with Jack Parrish, and—you know how innocently such things can happen when you're in a crazy mood—it ended with his trying to kiss her—standing in the lee of a wood-wing, and her boxing his ears. Not a bit of harm in it, you know. Just high spirits and fun and all that. I was standing just behind, and I laughed at them cheerfully enough until I smelled a whiff of sandal-wood. And there was Thungama looking like a little Hindu idol, with her set face and those gorgeous things hung on her rigid figure. She was just going on for her dance, so there was only time for me to have a little passing qualm of discomfort—then. After the performance, when we were at our make-up tables, Thungama said something low to Bildrah, and the black woman went and locked the door and then came back and sat at her mistress's feet on the floor.

"Many times we have talked of customs of East," said Thungama silkily, narrowing her eyelids and looking at us through her ever-so-thick lashes. "There is one custom of East I showing you how." She leaned forward and looked at me for a second or two. "You keeping very still," she informed me simply. "Chota Moti, you keeping still—Ari!"

Then she went over to Lil and touched her on the forehead with her small brown hand. I found myself staring fixedly at her little fingers. Somehow, for the moment, they looked like claws, thin and cruel. Then Thungama sat down before Lil, and looking at her in a fixed kind of way, began to talk.

I suppose she talked English. But, although we understood her frightfully clearly, I would have sworn that she was speaking in some strange tongue, and that it was our brains, not our ears, that were listening to it.

The room, as I look back on it, seemed very indefinite and yet very bright. Did you ever take ether or chloroform and watch things get out of proportion, and very big and bright and sort of dancing, as though in some awful heat? That was the way the dressing room looked to me then, as Thungama sat and smiled at Lil. Orientals don't smile often, but when they do it's usually time to say your prayers and take that drowning-man's last-look back over your past life.

Lil was greeny-white like billiard chalk, and her eyes were as vacant as empty teacups. She said later she had felt frozen—that all she was perfectly sure of was that she was dying, really dying—and dying from fear; at that.

"My father's fathers were kings in India," said Thungama. "We never permitted slaves to steal from us our own. When they stole, they died. You shall die. I have never hated before, but so have I never loved. Now that I can love, I can hate also. You shall die, and you shall die of your own fear—which is the worst of all deaths. Look at me and I will show you the death you are to die; and in seeing, you will feel. Look now!"

Their eyes seemed glued together for a minute, and then Lil began to gasp in broken breaths as if her life were being wrrenched out of her. Her eyes stood out of her head, and the perspiration shone on her face and neck; her hair was wet with it. And still Thungama went on smiling like that dreadful Comic Mask, or like one of her own Juis or devil spirits. And I bet there were plenty of them in the room, too.

"The priests have built the fire," she said. "The Mohunt, the Chiefest priest, stands by to condemn you. Smell now the smoke from the wood that begins to burn."

Lil still panted, and still stared at Thungama. Her eyes were awful; but I couldn't move—from fear of something else. I could smell the smoke, too, which seemed to be choking Lil's breath out of her; but the smoke I smelled seemed to be that of sandal-wood—heavy, suffocating, unbearable fumes of sandal-wood. Then I saw Thungama's head bowed over the little silver box sacred to the priests of Brahma. And the Tamil ayah's forehead was down on the floor.

"Dhurum nal!" muttered the black woman—which I think means "For the faith," or something like that. She seemed a little frightened then. But Thungama held the box higher, and cried clearly, "Sobhan Ullah!" (the Power of the Lord!) I shut my eyes. My head swam more and more dizzily. I could feel myself sway in the chair. The smell of the sandal-wood made me deathly sick. . . . I forced my eyes open. Thungama was speaking to Lil again.

"They have bound your arms and legs with rope. It cuts into your flesh, and the blood runs down. And now they fling you upon the pile of wood. Your shoulder is bruised and crushed as you fall. And now the smoke begins to crawl up into your face—before it sucks up your breath, they turn you that you may not die too quickly from the fumes. And just one little flame licks along your side and scorches the skin."

Lil was swaying to and fro by this time. She looked broken and half dead; I thought she would fall in a heap, but she was still straining her eyes to meet Thungama's dreadful black ones. I tried and tried to move, but couldn't. It was funny, you know, but I could really almost see that torture scene Thungama was describing, only dimly, as though a gauze curtain hung between it and me. Every now and then, as though something was blown aside for a second, I could get little lightning glimpses of grinning men and a girl on some smoking logs.

"Now a flame licks your naked feet, and now one catches your hair. It blazes up, and your scalp is scorched. But you do not die. You begin to be one burn from head to foot, but you do not die. The wood has been moistened, and the fire spreads slowly. You will not die though your hands and feet become charred stumps and your skin hangs in pieces. You will live, live until after very many hours the fire shall eat through to your heart. And with no lips left for your screams you will die—even as you are dying now—but slowly, oh, so slowly!—that I may watch you and be glad."

I don't know how long it lasted—the ghastly stillness that followed. Lil was silent now—her mouth was open, and her eyes set in a dreadful stare. Thungama was not smiling now; she looked terrible and remorseless, as something that had never been human. I wanted to crawl at her feet and scream for mercy, but I couldn't. My head was very light and queer, and things in the room flashed about as though I were drugged or drunk. And suddenly from miles and miles away I heard something—oh, something as loud as thunder on the doors of hell! Don't laugh; it sounded like that—big and—decisive, somehow. It was only a knock on the door. After a moment I heard voices. I couldn't follow them at first. Then I heard, suddenly, quite sharply and plainly in Gussie's rather loud tones: "You might unlock the door and let me tell you the news."

There was a little pause, and then—"News?" in Thungama's mouth, everyday voice.

"Yes, I should say so! Jack Parrish has eloped with Julia Finch—announced it after the show to-night, and are off for Brussels in the morning. Now will you let me in?"

Thungama made no answer and, grumbling, Gussie departed. There was another long silence; but life seemed to be coming back to me now. I felt awfully ill and faint, though, and my eyes felt queer. When I could see clearly, Thungama was standing over the crouching tumbled figure of Lil. The "Little Golden Lady" touched her indifferently with her foot. "You were almost dead," she said. "Your own fear would soon have killed you. But I will let you live. I have work to do elsewhere." And she smiled.

A minute later Lil rose to her feet. She shook all over, and she was white and sick, and kept feeling her wrists as though they hurt her. But she was very far from being dead; she'd only had a hideous scare. She stood for a moment thinking, and then she walked unsteadily up to Thungama, who was taking off a bracelet of beaten silver.

"What was it?" asked Lil bluntly. "Hypnotism?" Thungama raised her eyebrows innocently and looked up

with her polite, unjoyful little smile, quite the every-day Thungama.

"Not understanding," she said.

"Come now," said Lil, recovering herself further, "how did you do it? How did you make me feel like that?"

Thungama smiled at her indulgently, almost kindly. "Jao, Jao!" she said very, very gently and sweetly. "No-body understanding all things, Gulabi, Jao!" And we went.

We never saw her again, but Lemuel heard that she had gone abroad—to Brussels, he thought.

I dare say it was all nonsense. But I can't smell that stuff now without turning a bit faint. Sandal-wood—oh! sandal-wood was grown in the Devil's own orchard!

## BROOKLYN DOESN'T NEED SHELTER FOR HOMELESS

Deputy Commissioner William J. Doherty of the Charities Department has been conducting an examination of the shelter conditions for poor men in Brooklyn under the direction of Commissioner Kingsbury, to ascertain if the department would be warranted in pursuing a policy in Brooklyn along the same lines as the Recreation Pier in Manhattan opened Friday night. After a close inspection Mr. Doherty reported that if

there are any homeless men in Brooklyn they go to the Municipal Lodging House in Manhattan. He had been unable to find indications of a need of facilities of this character in this borough.

## MASTER PLUMBERS WILL CELEBRATE 50TH JUBILEE

The Association of Master Plumbers of the Borough of Brooklyn will celebrate its fiftieth anniversary in conjunction with the annual entertainment and reception in Prospect Hall, Tuesday evening, Jan. 20.

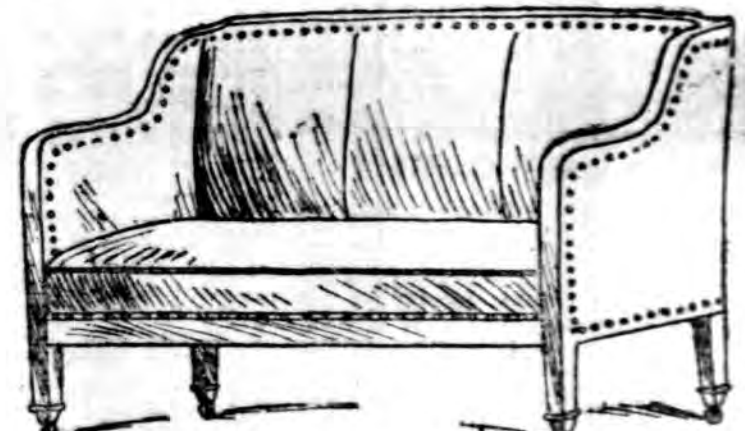
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